Violence as a Social Factor

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VIOLENCE, I.E., PHYSICAL FORCE used to another's hurt, which is the most brutal form the struggle between men can assume, is eminently corrupting. It tends, by its very nature, to suffocate the best sentiments of man, and to develop all the anti-social qualities: ferocity, hatred, revenge, the spirit of domination and tyranny, contempt of the weak, servility towards the strong.

And this harmful tendency arises also when violence is used for a good end. The love of justice which impelled one to the struggle, amid all the good original intentions, is not sufficient guarantee against the depraving influence exerted by violence on the mind and actions of him who uses it. In the whirl of battle one too often loses sight of the goal for which one fights, and one only thinks of returning, a hundred-fold if possible, the blows received; and when at last victory crowns the efforts of the party who fought for justice and humanity it is already corrupt and incapable of realizing the program by which it was inspired.

How many men who enter on a political struggle inspired with the love of humanity, of liberty, and of toleration, end by becoming cruel and inexorable proscribers.

How many sects have started with the idea of doing a work of justice in punishing some oppressor whom official "justice" could not or would not strike, have ended by becoming the instruments of private vengeance and base cupidity.

And the Anarchists who rebel against every sort of oppression and struggle for the integral liberty of each and who ought thus to shrink instinctively from all acts of violence which cease to be mere resistance to oppression and become oppressive in their turn . .. also are liable to fall into the abyss of brutal force.

Facts have proved that the Anarchists are not free from the errors and faults of authoritarian parties, and that, in their case as in that of the rest of humanity, atavistic instincts and the influence of the environment are often stronger than the best theories and noblest intentions.

The excitement caused by some recent explosions and the admiration for the courage with which the bomb-throwers faced death, sufficed to cause many Anarchists to forget their program, and to enter on a path which is the most absolute negation of all anarchist ideas and sentiments.

Hatred and revenge seemed to have become the moral basis of Anarchism. "The bourgeoisie does as bad and worse." Such is the argument with which they tried to justify and exalt every brutal deed.

"The masses are brutalized; we must force our ideas on them by violence." "One has the right to kill those who preach false theories." "The masses allow us to be oppressed; let us revenge

ourselves on the masses." "The more workers one kills the fewer slaves remain." Such are the ideas current in certain Anarchist circles. An Anarchist review, in a controversy on the different tendencies of the Anarchist movement, replied to a comrade with this unanswerable argument: "There will be bombs for you also."

It is true that these ultra-authoritarians, who so strangely persist in calling themselves Anarchists, are but a small fraction who acquired a momentary importance owing to exceptional circumstances. But we must remember that, generally speaking, they entered the movement inspired with those feelings of love and respect for the liberty of others which distinguish the true Anarchist, and only in consequence of a sort of moral intoxication produced by the violent struggle, they got to defend and extol acts and maxims worthy of the greatest tyrants. Nor must we forget that we have all, or nearly all, run the same danger, and that if most of us have stopped in time it is perhaps due to these mad exaggerations which have shown us beforehand into what an abyss we were in danger of falling.

Thus the danger of being corrupted by the use of violence, and of despising the people, and becoming cruel as well as fanatical persecutors, exists for all. And if in the coming revolution this moral degradation of the Anarchists were to prevail on a large scale, what would become of Anarchist ideas? And what would be the outcome of the Revolution?

Let us not consider humanity as a metaphysical conception devoid of reality, and let us not transform the love of others into a continuous, absurd, and impossible self-sacrifice.

Humanity is the slim total of human units, and everyone who defends in himself those rights which he recognizes in others, defends them to the advantage of all.

Altruism cannot go beyond loving others as one loves oneself, otherwise it ceases to be a practical reality, and becomes a misty idea which may attract some minds inclined to mysticism, but can certainly not become a moral law to be lived up to.

The object of the ideally moral man is that all men may have as little suffering and as such joy as possible.

Supposing the predominant instinct of self-preservation be eliminated, the mo.-al man, when obliged to fight, should act in such fashion that the total ill inflicted on the diverse combatants be as small as possible. Consequently he should not do another a great evil to avoid suffering a smaIl one. For instance he should not kill a man to avoid being punched; but he would not hesitate to break his legs if he could not do otherwise to prevent his killing him. And when it is a question of like evils, such as killing so as not to be killed, even then it seems to me that it is an advantage to society that the aggressor should die rather than the aggressed.

But if self-defence is a right one may renounce, the defence of others at the risk of hurting the aggressor is a duty of solidarity.

Is it true that the masses can emancipate themselves today without resorting to violent means?

Today, above the great majority of mankind who derive a scanty livelihood by their labour or who die through want of work, there exists a privileged class, who, having monopolized the means of existence and the management of social interests, shamefully exploit the former and deny the latter the means of work and life. This class, who are influenced solely by a thirst for power and profit, show no inclination (as facts prove) to voluntarily renounce their privileges, and to merge their private interests in the common good. On the contrary, it is ever arming itself with more powerful means of repression, and systematically uses violence not only to check every direct attack on their privileges, but also to crush in the bud every movement, every pacific organization, whose growth might endanger their power.

What means does Bell advise for getting out of this situation?

Propaganda, organization, moral resistance? Certainly these are the essential factors in social evolution, and it is from them that we must start, and without these revolutionary violence would be senseless, nay impossible.

Bell admits the right of the workers to break in the doors of a factory in order to seize the machinery, but he does not recognize their right to injure the factory-owner. And in this he is right if the owner should allow the workers to proceed without opposing them with force. But unfortunately the policemen will come with their truncheons and revolvers. What should the workers do then? Should they allow themselves to be taken and sent to prison? That is a game one soon gets tired of.

Bell certainly admits that the workers have the right to organize for the defeat of the bourgeoisie by means of a general strike. But what if the government sends down soldiers to slaughter them? Or what if the bourgeoisie, which after all can afford to wait, holds out? It will be absolutely necessary for the strikers, if they do not wish to be starved out at the end of the second day, to seize on food wherever they can find it, and as it will not be given up to them without resistance, they will be obliged to take it by force. So they will either have to fight or consider themselves as conquered.

In reality Bell's error consists in this, that while discussing the methods of attaining an ideal he presupposes that the ideal is already attained.

If it were really possible to progress peacefully, if the partisans of a social system different to that which we desire did not force us to submit to it, then we might say that we were living under Anarchy.

For, what is Anarchy? We do not wish to impose on others any hard and fast system, nor do we pretend, at least I do not, to possess the secret of a perfect social system. We wish that each social group be able, within the limits imposed by the liberty of others, to experiment on the mode of life which it believes to be the best, and we believe in the efficacy of persuasion and example. If society did not deny us this right we should have no right to complain, and we would simply have to strive to make our system the most successful, so as to prove that it was the better. It is only because today one class has the monopoly of power and riches, and is therefore able to force the people, at the end of a bayonet, to work for it, that we have the right, and that it is our duty, to fight for attaining, with the aid of force, those conditions which render it possible to experiment on better forms of society.

In short it is our duty to call attention to the dangers attendant on the use of violence, to insist on the principle of the inviolability of human life, to combat the spirit of hatred and revenge, and to preach love and toleration. But to blind ourselves to the true conditions of the struggle, to renounce the use of force for the purpose of repelling and attacking force, relying on the fanciful efficacy of "passive resistance," and in the name of a mystical morality to deny the right of self-defence, or to restrain it to the point of rendering it illusionary, can only end in nothing, or in leaving a free field of action to the oppressors.

If we really wish to strive for the emancipation of the people, do not let us reject in principle the means without which the struggle can never be ended; and, remember, the most energetic measures are also the most efficient and the least wasteful. Only do not let us lose sight of the fa ct that ours is a struggle inspired by love and not by hatred, and that it is our duty to do all in our power to see that the necessary violence does not degenerate into mere ferocity, and that it be used only as a weapon in the struggle of right against wrong.

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